

A Sermon Preached at Maple Street Congregational Church, UCC
September 22, 2017
Danvers, MA
Rev. Kevin M Smith
Matthew 22:15-22

Flip of the Coin

This morning our scripture lesson deals with a couple of differing kingdoms. One, the kingdom of power and wealth and the other the Kingdom of God. Jesus was out there in Galilee surrounded by some of the religious rule-keepers and for good measure they had brought along some of the government men from Herod's rule. In some respects this was kind of a summit meeting of representatives of two different kingdoms, one the realm of God's world and the other, the realm of the politically and religiously powerful. Yes, I do think there are times when the religious realm gets a bit disconnected from God and the work Jesus is doing here on earth on behalf of God. The religious and political leaders came with a prepared agenda wanting to trip up this prophetic rabble rouser who all the countryside was getting very stirred up about and whispering about a new messiah. When people who are doing the bidding of the politically powerful either because they are employed by that powerful person or are beholden to that powerful person in some way, they don't want the boat rocked do they? Jesus was good at rocking the boats of the powerful and those without power alike. As they say, Jesus' ministry had a lot to do with afflicting the powerful and comforting the afflicted.

So our rule protectors, the Pharisees, who loved to let other people know they were violating the written rules often laid down by religious leaders, and the politicians who needed to keep the peace among the rabble thought they would be clever and get Jesus into a verbal pickle where they might find pretext for sanctioning him in some way. Written rules are not always bad; they help organizations adhere to their traditions that worked in the past and they attempt to bring responsibility to future actions. But, written rules can grow old and out of date at times, and they can also be used to stifle change and transformation that might be needed to fit new circumstances in the life of an organization. Rules are just rules--they are not necessarily the Gospel. So these rule protectors wanted to hush Jesus up for fear that Caesar's wrath might descend upon them for not doing their job. And, they thought they had come up with a clever way to outsmart Jesus and get him to back away from the Good News of God's universal love that he was spreading and that was inspiring people to perhaps different priorities than those secular priorities laid down by Caesar.

Notice how these guys try to reel Jesus in by appealing to his ego and pride before setting him up with the question that was really a trap. They say to Jesus, "Teacher, we know you have integrity, teach the way of God accurately, are indifferent to popular opinion, and don't pander to your students." They are projecting their own prideful ways onto Jesus, which of course, Jesus doesn't operate under. They praise him with false praise in order to set the stage for their trap. Jesus doesn't bite, he doesn't fall into

that trap of pride and arrogance—those are not part of the kingdom that Jesus resides within.

Folks, I really believe there have always been two parallel kingdoms or realms going on in our lives. Each one of us straddles with one leg in the secular realm of human invented culture, organizations, conventions, and rules in order to make our way in the world and, hopefully, to get along with one another. In this realm we are sometimes put in conflict with the realm of God which, when we enter into it, helps us transcend ourselves and live into the humble, loving, unselfish, generous, compassionate, and forgiving realm that pervaded Jesus' life and relationship with God. It's not that the human realm or structure is inherently bad, but it does lend itself to competition and pursuit of the material at the expense of the sacred at times. Sometimes the rules are vehicles for keeping power rather than serving needed change. Sometimes this leads to hard choices we all have to make.

I think Jesus realized and understood these two kingdoms very well and the relative importance of each in the eyes and heart of the eternal, the sacred, the “big love” that is God. So, he flipped that coin and recognized that it belonged to the realm of Caesar, not his realm. Basically, he was telling these folks who would try to trap him into their realm that he got it—that there were times we all had to adhere to parameters of our culture, but eternal, real, loyalty, and well-being is found in giving priority to God's realm, God's kingdom. Organizations, nation-states, government, rule-making authorities come and go, but God's realm is eternal.

Which realm are you most loyal to? Everyone one of us has a choice which realm in every moment of our lives we will live into. The best of times is when God's realm and the secular realm link up. In fact, I believe the behaviors that we aspire to in God's realm help make this other parallel realm a better place to live and thrive for everyone.

My friends, do more than flip a coin when you make the decision which realm is owed your ultimate loyalty. If you choose love, compassion, forgiveness, and generosity you will make this earthly realm so much better to live in for yourself and your neighbors. Amen.

